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The State's Informal Organisations: Paramilitaries in the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict

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During the conflict between the Turkish state and Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê*. PKK), many irregular pro-state armed groups carried out violent acts that targeted Kurdish civilians. The 1990s were one of the most violent decades in the hundred-year history of violence in Northern Kurdistan (*Bakurê Kurdistanê*, or just "*Bakur*," the north), a region more often referred to in the literature and known popularly as "Turkish Kurdistan," or just "the east" or "the southeast". In 1984, the PKK initiated an armed struggle against the Turkish state, which responded by creating and making use of several paramilitary forces that became some of the most important actors in the conflict during the second half of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s. The largest and generally most important of those paramilitary groups were the Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counter-terrorism Organisation (*Jandarma İstihbarat ve Terörle Mücadele*, JİTEM), village guards (*Korucular*), Police Special Operation Teams (*Özel Harekat Timleri*), and Hizbullah, an illegal radical Kurdish Sunni-Islamist militant group in Turkey (not to be mistaken with the Shi'a-Islamist Hezbollah in Lebanon). In addition to those well-known groups, which had semi-formal and informal characteristics, other clandestine groups were also created by the state authorities, and they were used in conjunction with the abovementioned paramilitary forces.

On November 3, 1996, an event that came to be known as the Susurluk scandal occurred when a luxury car crashed into a truck near the town of Susurluk. There were four passengers in the car, three of whom died. Abdullah Çatlı (1956–1996) was one of them; he was the well-known leader of the militant radical-right Grey Wolves and a mafia kingpin who was wanted by Interpol for his involvement in a number of assassinations. The second was a model named Gonca Us, who was Çatlı's companion. The third victim was Hüseyin Kocadağ (1944–1996), who was director of the İstanbul School of Police at the time. The last passenger was a member of parliament, Sedat Bucak (1960–), who was injured in the accident. He was the head of a pro-state Kurdish tribe considered to be the most significant wing of the largest paramilitary organisation in Turkey, the village guards. This traffic accident revealed the existence of "deep state" (*derin devlet*) connections between politicians, security forces, and the mafia.

A month later on December 6, Turkish journalist and columnist İsmet Berkan (born in 1964) wrote an article titled "The MGK's Approval for Gladio" in *Radikal*, a liberal daily newspaper. Making reference to "Gladio," which was a NATO-led secret paramilitary organisation that operated in Italy during the Cold War, Berkan reported about a top-secret document that

revealed the role of the Turkish state in paramilitary activities. The document that Berkan was alleged to have seen dealt with the issue of the creation of a special organisation by the Turkish National Security Council (*Milli Güvenlik Kurulu*, MGK) to eliminate pro-PKK Kurdish civilians and supporters. But how reliable was his claim? In a separate incident many years later, Berkan claimed that he had seen a video recording of an attack on a woman wearing a headscarf during the Gezi Park protests of 2013, which was subsequently used as government propaganda against the demonstrations, but he later withdrew the claim with an apology, saying that he had not actually seen such a recording. Berkan's credibility as a journalist was tarnished, his motivations began to be questioned, and his earlier claim was undermined. However, the Kurdish newspaper *Özgür Ülke* as well as some Turkish journalists, researchers, and state officials have made similar statements and written articles about the MGK's decision to establish and use a special organisation against the Kurdish population. Investigative journalist Uğur Mumcu (1942–1993) was killed in early 1993 and the office of *Özgür Ülke* was bombed in late 1994, which lent credence to Berkan's claims.

*The MGK's Approval for Gladio**

In fact, everything goes back to the beginning of 1992. At that time, the Turkish General Staff radically changed its strategy for fighting the PKK. From now on, the military, which had previously intervened and immediately retaliated after every attack, began to organise itself like a guerrilla force and take action without waiting for the PKK to act. This strategy shift would soon pay off. The initiative was no longer with the PKK, but with the military. The PKK was on the run, and the military was chasing after it. […]

The inventor of the technique that was to be implemented was actually the British. This new tactic has two important pillars: The first is to capture terrorists before they act and kill them if necessary. The second is to treat people who provide moral and material support [to terrorists] in the same way that terrorists are treated.

This strategy shift came onto the agenda of the MGK in late 1992.

In an MGK document that was seen by the author of these lines, there was also an organisational chart [of a group] that was intended to be assembled and the names of the people who would take part in this organisation [were included]. Among the names was Abdullah Çatlı. Police officers from the Special Operations Team, several soldiers, and some of Çatlı's friends would also be involved in the organisation.

* Translated from the original Turkish in İsmet Berkan, "Gladio'ya MGK Onayı," *Radikal*, 6 December 1996.

This new tactic was initially rejected by the MGK. President [Turgut] Özal and the general commander of the Gendarmerie of the time, Eşref Bitlis, were opposed to the collaboration of the state with individuals who were not government officials.

This probably has nothing to do with the issue, but it is an interesting coincidence that first General Bitlis and then Turgut Özal died, one in an accident and the other from a heart attack.

Süleyman Demirel became president and Tansu Çiller became prime minister. […]

Since those who had objected to the decision were no longer around, the issue could come onto the agenda of the MGK once again. It did so, and this new method of fighting was approved in autumn of 1993. What you call "Gladio" and I call a "special organisation" was established by way of a decision made by the MGK.

[…] We all remember Tansu Çiller's statement: "We will eradicate the PKK's sources of income."

Behçet Cantürk, Savaş Buldan, Yusuf Ekinci, Hacı Karay, Adnan Yıldırım, Medet Serhat and finally Ömer Lütfü Topal…

All these figures were involved in drug trafficking in one way or another. None of them are alive today. They either moved drugs for the PKK or they had to pay extortion fees to the PKK. Either way, the PKK was earning an income. And none of them are alive now.

Özgür Ülke [Free Country] was like the PKK's official publication. Abdullah Öcalan was writing articles for this newspaper under the pseudonym Ali Fırat. Its headquarters and offices were bombed. The İstanbul police allegedly caught the bombers, but because of an "order from above," they were released.

These lines were written based on a document that I could only skim quickly and which I was not allowed to make a copy of or take notes from while reading.

I wish that this "news," whose reliability I have been able to ascertain by looking into other matters, was actually a lie. Of course, I do not doubt that it will immediately be denied today. Indeed, it is my wish that those who deny it will be telling the truth.

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Berkan begins by saying that the Turkish state's strategy for fighting the PKK changed in 1992. Indeed, the idea of formulating and establishing a new strategy had been debated by high-ranking soldiers, members of parliament, and journalists in Turkey starting in the late 1980s, and in fact a new strategy was implemented in the early 1990s through the concept of a "territorial army" (the aim of which was to hold positions outside urban centres) and the

doctrine of low-intensity conflict (LIC) (essentially, a broad-based approach incorporating a counter-insurgency initiative). Berkan thus describes this new strategy as involving a military unit that is organised like a guerrilla movement. Although they are not mentioned here, there were internal as well as external factors that triggered this transformation. While inside Turkey support for the PKK in Kurdish society was increasing rapidly, outside the country other key events were unfolding, such as the Gulf War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which benefitted the Kurdish national struggle. Following these developments, the chief of general staff, Doğan Güreş, one of the founding actors involved in the application of the doctrine of LIC in Turkey, stated that in 1991 he had investigated the types of irregular warfare used by various countries (such as the US, UK and Spain) to see if they could be utilised in the fight against the PKK and he also noted that the Turkish army and the government subsequently began to implement the new doctrine. Berkan also says in his article that this idea/strategy originated with the British. The restructuring of the Turkish army on the basis of the doctrine of LIC played a determining role in the reorganisation and development of paramilitary forces, with members of this special organisation or "Gladio" consisting of far-right militants (including Abdullah Çatlı), soldiers, and special police teams.

The doctrine of LIC set forth crucial conditions in terms of the reorganisation and development of paramilitary groups during the period of its implementation. It was also as much a political concept as a military one. State institutions were administered by a particularly nationalist and radical secularist political and military elite during the first half of the 1990s, which created a political atmosphere that played an important role in the reorganisation of paramilitary forces. Thus, it can be said that the changing structure of paramilitary forces in Turkey was a result of a new war doctrine which combined with the political climate to produce dramatic increases in the membership figures for paramilitary organisations. As a consequence, the characteristics of paramilitary groups changed in terms of the types of violence they used. Specifically, while intelligence gathering had hitherto been their main task, they were granted new powers and began to focus on covert action and assault operations that did not exclude the killing of civilians, and a division of labour came into being among different paramilitary forces, which were now split up according to both geographical deployment (urban-rural) and operational functions (death squads-auxiliary forces). In short, the new strategy implemented by the state authorities after 1991 prompted a paramilitary war on civilians known or suspected to be supporting or sympathetic to Kurdish guerrillas, including pro-Kurdish political parties. There was a rapid increase in state violence against Kurds in the form of assassinations, forced disappearances, torture, and the burning and evacuation of villages and lands.

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Berkan wrote that the state had established a secret organisation, one of the primary aims of which was the killing of pro-PKK Kurdish businessmen. Following the Susurluk incident, a new debate arose concerning the origins and functions of paramilitary organisations, particularly

with regard to their role in the ongoing war against the PKK. By exposing the connections between and interlinkages of paramilitary organisations with formal politics, the Susurluk scandal came to hold a significant place in recent Turkish history. For the first time in the history of the republic, the complex network of relationships among state institutions and government authorities on the one hand, and paramilitary organisations and mafia leaders on the other, came to light. For their part, while refuting the existence of or claiming to have no knowledge about ties between some paramilitary forces and the mafia—in the political tradition of "plausible deniability"—officials did not deny that the state had a relationship with others. In an oft-quoted remark she made at the time, Prime Minister Tansu Çiller stated that "people who shoot bullets and those who suffer from bullets in the name of the state are both honourable."

The Susurluk incident and the public reactions it triggered were quite significant in terms of revelations concerning the state's paramilitary operations and its relations with paramilitary and criminal organisations. Following the car accident, parliament assembled a commission to investigate those relations. The Susurluk Research Commission prepared a report that reviewed the events that took place. The Susurluk Report revealed the existence of a network of organised crime and relationships between named members of paramilitary groups, right-wing parties, mafia leaders, members of the Turkish parliament, and military and administrative bureaucracies.

Years later in 2021, a series of video-based confessions made by Sedat Peker, which received millions of views and were interpreted by some commentators and the opposition as "the second Susurluk," shook up Turkey's political scene. The ultranationalist and eccentric mafia leader Peker, who has enjoyed relations with politicians, bureaucrats, the military, and intelligence bureaus, has allegedly participated in the war against the Kurds since the 1990s. In his videos, Peker has made numerous statements targeting both former and acting interior ministers, former intelligence officers, high-ranking army and police officials, businesspeople, journalists, and other politicians. In fact, given the history of the Turkish deep state, this continuity should not come as a surprise.

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